

his life, but has been disillusioned with the way the church has moved from its traditions, and is disappointed that it does not give the lead he considers appropriate to combat the evils of the world today. She has spoken of our understanding of the signs of the times and of Christ's imminent return to the earth to establish righteousness and peace. This has led to interest in the things we believe. She considers that the time is right for him to be invited home so that she and her husband can explain more fully the gospel message with open Bible. It remains to be seen if he takes

up the invitation, but this is, perhaps, the sort of opportunity we should all seek. He is much more likely to be encouraged to attend our meetings after a homely discussion than by an advertisement or a cold call at his doorstep.

So, preaching in our homes should be modelled so far as is possible on the principles we are given in Scripture, but it should be directed to suit the needs of today. Its success will be found, not in self-dependence and human endeavour, but through faith in the strength which God supplies through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

# The law and our preaching

David Pearce

*New laws in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world such as Eastern Europe are increasingly impacting upon our preaching. Whilst not seeking deliberately to offend others, we have a duty to continue to proclaim the Truth.*

**J**O BROSH was an Israeli. He had emigrated from Europe after the First World War, and learned agriculture the hard way, working with his hands. Now, after sixty years, he was an international expert in irrigation, and a wealthy man. But he still lived in the humble bungalow near Joppa he had built all those years ago. "I could live in Paris, or New York, or London", he told me, "but there I would be despised as a Jew. Here I can say what I like and do what I like. I am free".

In the United Kingdom, too, we have been used to saying what we like. 'Freedom of speech'—the right to voice our point of view, to disagree, even to criticise the government—has been part of being British for centuries. We all have a right to our opinion. Or so we think. But do we? Subtle changes have been taking place in our society in the last decade by which the voices of minorities such as ours have been muffled by legislation and 'political correctness'. We find we need to take greater care over what we say in public. Nor is the situation getting easier in other countries where we operate, particularly the Christadelphian Bible Mission (CBM) field in East Europe. What has been happening, and how can we adjust to the new situation?

## United Kingdom

Let's look first at the changes in attitude in Britain. One obvious area of concern is the legislation introduced to restrict incitement to religious hatred.

Muslims, now in their second and third generations from immigration, are flourishing in big cities such as Leicester and Bradford, and raising their mosques amongst the empty churches. Generally, these communities have been happy to attend our schools and universities, and run their own businesses. But in some cases extreme or 'fundamentalist' leaders have preached (not without reason) against the evils of our society, to the point of encouraging youngsters to overthrow the régime. This then provokes a public reaction, in which all Muslims are condemned. Legislation was already in place to restrict anger against those of another *race*. The Government reacted by adding a fresh layer of regulations to control criticism of other people's beliefs as well (the **Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006**).

The effect, probably unintended by the politicians, has been to neutralise any open expression of religious opinion. The actual wording of the Act refers to "a person who uses threatening words or behaviour, or displays any written material which is threatening . . . if he intends thereby to stir up religious hatred". None of our public talks or campaigns would fall into this category; we have no desire to stir up hatred of any kind, being called to live peaceably with all men (see Romans 12:18). But instead of promoting religious

tolerance, the new laws have actually made people like us with a strong point of view socially unacceptable.

Public attitudes are easily reshaped. School morning assemblies are no longer 'Church of England' with prayers and hymns, in case some of the children do not believe in the Christian God. Wearing of religious ornaments in schools and hospitals has been condemned. Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ, has been watered down, or at least balanced, by days holy to other faiths such as the Hindu festival of Diwali. Even the Prince of Wales has declined to be 'Defender of the Faith' of his national church, preferring to sponsor 'faith' in general. In a recent case a nurse who offered to say a prayer for a patient was suspended. It only takes one person with an axe to grind to inform the police that they feel attacked, and the law insists the complaint must be investigated.

Similarly, some of our ecclesias have advertised a subject such as "Peace in the Middle East", and have been accused of favouring the Jews against the Muslims. Others have tried to hire a hall for a public talk and have been turned down by the local council because an officer has been afraid he will be accused of bias by humanists or other groups. In my own ecclesia, our monthly stall on the market has been withdrawn because of complaints.

Moving to another but similar subject, homosexuals are now granted the same rights as heterosexuals, and under the **Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008** it is illegal to stir up hatred against them. However, the House of Lords forced an amendment which prevents action against someone who is merely expressing an opinion that homosexual activity is wrong, thus: "In this Part, for the avoidance of doubt, the discussion or criticism of sexual conduct or practices or the urging of persons to refrain from or modify such conduct or practices shall not be taken of itself to be threatening or intended to stir up hatred". Gay rights campaigners are pressing for this amendment to be replaced.<sup>1</sup> Under the **Civil Partnership Act 2004** homosexuals can now be linked in a 'civil partnership', which gives them a similar legal status to a married couple. Since the UK **Equality Act 2006** it is illegal to discriminate against homosexuals when they apply for a job, ask for accommodation in a hotel or guest house, or apply to rent a flat. In January 2008 the European Court of Human Rights (to which Britain subscribes) ruled that same-sex couples have

the right to adopt a child. And in British schools, under the new Code of Conduct for Teachers of the General Teaching Council (all teachers will have to sign up before they can register with the Council), teachers will have to agree that they will not bias children against homosexuality.

All this can lead to difficulties if Christadelphians are running a business or employed in a school. It can also affect our preaching. We would never incite the public to hate homosexuals. But our uncompromising view that the Bible condemns all forms of sexual aberration lays us open to complaint from gay activists bent on publicity. We need to take care over the wording of our advertisements and leaflets to avoid misinterpretation, just as Jesus spoke carefully in the presence of the Pharisees who were trying to catch him off guard.

What is more disturbing are very recent cases that have hit the headlines where employers have tried to prevent employees from preaching to colleagues at work. It is important for individual brothers and sisters to know the wording of their Contract of Employment, which governs what they can and cannot do at work. The Christian Institute has a helpful booklet, *Religious Liberty in the Workplace*, written by a practising lawyer, which gives advice on this topic.<sup>2</sup> In summary, he says that an employer has a duty to protect the deeply felt beliefs of an employee from discrimination or harassment.

An important distinction in this context is the difference between reasonable discussion and harassment. We all have 'human rights' to hold our own opinions, but if in expressing them we upset others to the extent that they are made deeply uncomfortable, we may be guilty of upsetting *their* human rights. Managers particularly must not abuse their position of authority to inflict their views on those who do not want to listen. On the other hand, if we allow blasphemy, swearing or anti-Christian behaviour to pass unchallenged from a desire to avoid confrontation, we make things worse for others who hold Christian principles. It is also good always to qualify a judgement by linking it to what the Bible says, or what our church believes, rather than stating it as an absolute truth.

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1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/24/church-of-england-incitement-hatred>.
  2. [http://christian.org.uk/rel\\_liberties/ldf/employeesbooklet.pdf](http://christian.org.uk/rel_liberties/ldf/employeesbooklet.pdf).

One area of preaching that has been affected by British law is our efforts to teach children about the Bible. Many ecclesias invite youngsters from the area surrounding their hall to join in Sunday School or youth activities. The **Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006** is introducing controls on those who regularly work with children, under the aegis of the Independent Safeguarding Authority, to prevent paedophiles targeting children. This applies to workers in both paid and voluntary capacities. This means that brothers and sisters taking classes, or even driving children to a hall, will now have to be screened by the police for criminal records and put on a national register. Some ecclesias have already begun implementing the required procedures.<sup>3</sup>

A more bizarre situation arose recently where campaigners were out on the streets handing out leaflets advertising the Bible Exhibition in a nearby hall. They were told by an officious city council representative that if any of their leaflets were found lying on the ground, they would be taken to court for breaking the law about litter, and fined separately for each piece of paper. Fortunately they were wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the details of their activities, so they continued to walk round the town as living billboards.

Summarising, we can see that, in the UK, recent laws, and public reaction to those laws, have shaped restrictions on our preaching activities which leave us less free to say what we think. As a marker of the extent of this change, we can compare the government's stout defence twenty years ago of Salmon Rushdie's right to mock Mahomet in his book *The Satanic Verses*, and the decision by the Home Office a few months ago to exclude the Dutch M.P. Geert Wilders, a well-known anti-Islamist, on the grounds that his visit "would threaten public harmony". However, while avoiding deliberate offence to others, we still have a duty to proclaim the Truth to a godless world. And we must continue to pray, as the apostle urges, "for kings, and for all that are in authority" (1 Tim. 2:1,2), so that what remaining liberties we have may continue.

Now we will look briefly at what has been happening in Eastern Europe.

### Eastern Europe

It was amazing, twenty years ago, to observe the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of President Gorbachov's *glasnost* (openness) that opened up the vast areas of the former Soviet Un-

ion to visitors with Bibles. As a result, many new brothers and sisters have joined our community.

The euphoria that greeted our pioneers, as people who were starved of knowledge about God found joy and hope from the Scriptures, has mellowed with time. And the Eastern Orthodox Church has quickly responded to the new freedoms by resuming its traditional place alongside the government. Now, in a state that is avowedly secular, we recently watched Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev kiss both the new Patriarch Kirill and his golden icon at his inauguration ceremony.

The constitution of the new Russia embraced freedom of worship by individuals. The wording was then copied over into the constitutions of most of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). But in recent years the net has been tightened against minority groups such as ours, often on the pretext of controlling terrorism. To own land and premises, and to preach in public, religious groups have to be registered with the authorities. They can only do this with (in Russia) ten or more members in a city, a named address, and a history of over fifteen years of operation.

In Kazakhstan and Belarus all assemblies and the issuing of religious literature are now illegal without registration. We have found many obstacles placed in the way, and after five years have still not achieved registration in Kazakhstan. This places severe restrictions on our activities, especially on meetings for the Breaking of Bread, and forbids unregistered visits from overseas 'missionaries'. Meetings have been raided, and members fined or held under surveillance.

In the Ukraine and Russia, interpretation of the law by local officials has left us unmolested so far, and countries such as Poland and Romania that have joined the EU have extra protection from more liberal European laws.<sup>4</sup> Maybe we have to face the probability that in years to come we will no longer be able to enter these countries, and our brethren and sisters there will have to go 'underground' to survive. We urgently need to prepare them to preach and pray on their own, with the spiritual stamina to hold fast.

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3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent\\_Safeguarding\\_Authority](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_Safeguarding_Authority).

4. Human rights organisations monitor religious freedoms in all these countries, and a useful Internet site to consult is <http://www.wwrn.org/>.